

BBC BITESIZE - BLOOD BROTHERS

Episode 6

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. If you want to get all the episodes in this podcast, make sure you download the BBC Sounds app.

Jean: And don't forget that whilst you're in the BBC sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you with your revision. Full versions of some of the texts you might be studying, revision playlists and other Bitesize podcasts series to help with different GCSE subjects.

Carl: In this series, we're heading to Liverpool to discover Willy Russell's Blood Brothers. I'm Carl Anka.

Jean: And I'm Jean Menzies. And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at the dramatisation of Blood Brothers. Blood Brothers is obviously a play. So simply reading it does give a limited experience of how it is meant to be because it was written to be performed.

Carl: There's so much that goes into play when it's on stage. We're talking about actors, scenery, production, lights, sound, and the audience itself. This all builds up to create an atmosphere for the viewer.

Jean: And in a musical, how songs are performed is important too, because a director will make choices based on their own interpretation. So when we're looking at the dramatisation of Blood Brothers, we can split it into three categories, characterization, staging, and music. So we shall start with characterization.

Jean: This is Mickey as a child.

Extract

Mickey: I'm older than you. I'm nearly eight.

Jean: As a teenager.

Extract

Mickey: Eddie, I haven't even got one girlfriend.

Jean: And as an adult.

Extract

Mickey: That was kid stuff, Eddie, Didn't anyone tell you?

Carl: We've just whizzed through Mickey, through different points in his life.

Jean: Mickey at seven, as a teenager, and as an adult but all played by the same actor. As part of the characterization, when the play is performed, the actors playing the characters of Mickey, Edward, Linda and Sammy, all play these characters as children, teenagers and adults.

Carl: It's pretty clever, isn't it? Willy Russell says in these notes at the beginning of the play, that the same actors should play the characters throughout. So whoever is playing these characters needs to play differently according to the age of the character in the play. So there are times when you are watching brothers, where you could see a 30 year old man, try and talk and act like a seven year old, which is a bit weird the first time you watch it, but you get used to it after about 15 minutes or so.

Jean: Yeah, first, I did wonder why they hadn't cast children. But then the further you get into the play, it does add to that developing character to have seen the same actor do those developing roles. And it doesn't sound like an easy task. Even just taking Mickey, those three ages are vastly different for him, aren't they? Mickey, age seven is friendly and warm and open, he gets a little more awkward as a teenager. And then when he comes out of prison as an adult, he's depressed and finds it difficult to express himself.

Carl: I do wonder if it's a dream role as an actor to play so many different parts of one character. Or maybe it's a headache, a bit of a nightmare at the same time. It's a lot of pressure. Because you have to help the audience follow along and understand everything that's happened and changed, depending on the time of the play. Your use of voice, your use of facial expressions, your use of body language. There are points in time, where adult Mickey has to show the pain and vulnerability that child Mickey had, but not make it too obvious that child Mickey is still there.

Jean: And it's not just Mickey's character either. They all changed throughout. The kids grew up and Edward becomes a successful businessman. Mrs Lyons goes from being a powerful and manipulative woman to someone we see losing control and brandishing a knife at Mrs Johnstone in Act Two.

Carl: The narrator doesn't change. But the narrator is still difficult to play in a different way. Because even though the narrator doesn't interact with other characters, they're on stage throughout, and the narrator speaks to and about all the other characters in the play, even if the other characters in the play don't show any awareness of the narrator's presence.

Jean: Let's see some of Willy Russell's production notes.

Production note

The setting for Blood Brothers is an open stage, with the different settings and time spans being indicated by lighting changes, with the minimum of properties and furniture. The whole play should flow along easily and smoothly, with no cumbersome scene changes.

Jean: So the production notes tell us that the story is the important part. The actors and the dialogue are what we need for the story and the set doesn't matter. Because the focus should be on what's happening in the play, and the relationships between the characters without the distraction of scene

changes and fuss on stage. Different settings and times can be shown by the lighting instead, which makes sense to keep the focus on the characters and how they interact and develop

Production note

Two areas are semi-permanent – the Lyons house and the Johnstone house. We see the interior of the Lyonses' comfortable home but usually only the exterior front door of the Johnstone house, with the 'interior' scenes taking place outside the door.

Jean: This is interesting, isn't it, because we keep seeing how Blood Brothers is showing us a difference in class between the two boys. Having these two areas separate on stage really emphasises the difference between the families, and where and how they live, showing the fancy inside of the Lyons' house, but keeping the Johnstone's outside their front door really drives a difference to the audience.

Production note

The area between the two houses acts as a communal ground for the street scenes, park scenes, etc.

Jean: So the place the boys meet will be somewhere in the middle of their two homes.

Carl: It's a figurative and literal meaning of the middle ground for the boys.

Jean: I love that description. And then every time you see them go between their two homes, it's like they're crossing a boundary or a barrier, because in a literal sense, they are in the middle ground between their houses, but also figuratively. We can look at the more imaginative meaning of the phrase. It's a middle ground for their lives and not too far over to one side or social class where the other boy doesn't necessarily fit.

Carl: Where the differences don't really matter. And they're not emphasised by their surroundings or background. I like how the staging in Blood Brothers is so minimal. I think the story is so powerful and Willy Russell was right not to distract from messaging with one big scene change. He really wants to let the story speak and the story is excellent.

Jean: He lets the music speak too, which is the final thing we need to discuss in dramatization.

Carl: The songs are an integral part of Blood Brothers. They're spread throughout the play, and they're used for different reasons. Sometimes they create the mood and the atmosphere, or they fill in the gaps in the storyline, remind the audience of the key themes, or like this one from Mrs Johnstone, they reveal information about the characters that we don't already know:

Extract

Mrs Johnstone: (*singing*) We all had curly salmon sandwiches,
An' how the ale did flow,
They said the bride was lovelier than Marilyn Monroe.
And we went dancing,

Yes, we went dancing.

Jean: This is the first moment we properly meet Mrs Johnstone. And this song allows her to give us her backstory straightaway. And it feels natural, it shows how seamlessly they're incorporated into the play. Because obviously, bursting into song isn't the most natural way to start a conversation is it...

Carl: The actors remain in character when they sing, which I think really make things feel natural, as it really feels as if they're revealing their thoughts and emotions to us. And also the songs sound like songs that they've listened to within the play. Again, this is a musical. So they speak until they're so emotional, they have no choice but to sing. And that's why you get information you haven't heard before, because they're at a heightened emotional level.

Jean: And Willie Russell did aim to have songs that were reminiscent of the type of music sung in working men's clubs. So the music does help create the mood of the types of places that Mrs Johnstone and her family might have gone to.

Carl: I really think you can feel that. It goes without saying some of the songs really do get stuck in your head. And they make us feel emotional too.

Jean: Like the song Tell Me It's Not True. If you haven't heard it, go and listen to it after this and you'll feel every word of Mrs Johnstone seeing her boys lying dead at the end of Act Two. It's emotional and you really do believe it.

Carl: We've reached the end of episode six. So, thank you listener for joining us for the Bitesize, English literature podcast. We've been talking all about the dramatisation of Blood Brothers, we've discussed the characterization, the staging, the music, of the play. We hope you learned something with us

Jean: But we've still got a lot to discuss. So take a listen to the other episodes on BBC Sounds to find out more. And in Episode Seven, we're going to be taking a closer look at the context of Blood Brothers and the time it was written and first performed.